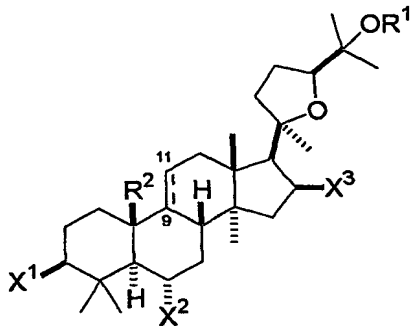
IT IS CLAIMED:

1. A method for conditioning the skin, comprising: applying topically to the skin a formulation comprising a compound of formula I:



I

where:

each of X^1, X^2, and X^3 is independently selected from hydroxy, lower alkoxy, lower acyloxy, keto, and a glycoside;

OR^1 is selected from hydroxy, lower alkoxy, lower acyloxy, and a glycoside;

wherein any of the hydroxyl groups on said glycoside may be substituted with a further glycoside, lower alkyl, or lower acyl, such that the compound includes a maximum of three glycosides; and

R^2 is methyl and ---- represents a double bond between carbons 9 and 11; or, R^2 forms, together with carbon 9, a fused cyclopropyl ring, and ---- represents a single bond between carbons 9 and 11.

2. The method of claim 1, wherein said compound includes zero, one, or two glycosides, none of which is substituted with a further glycoside.

3. The method of claim 2, wherein said compound includes zero or two glycosides, none of which is substituted with a further glycoside.

4. The method of claim 1, wherein each said glycoside, when present, is of the D configuration.

5. The method of claim 1, wherein R^2 forms, together with carbon 9, a fused cyclopropyl ring; and ---- represents a single bond between carbons 9 and 11.

6. The method of claim 2, wherein each of X^1 and X^2 is independently selected from hydroxy, lower alkoxy, lower acyloxy, and a glycoside, and X^3 is selected from hydroxy, lower alkoxy, lower acyloxy, keto, and a glycoside.

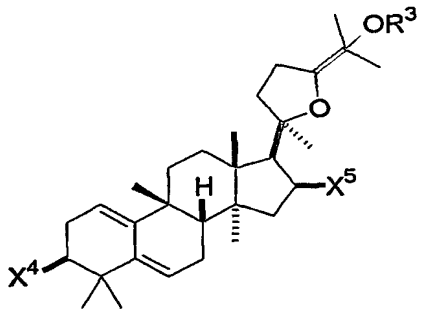
7. The method of claim 2, wherein X^1 is OH or a glycoside, each of X^2 and OR^1 is independently OH or a glycoside, and X^3 is OH or keto.

8. The method of claim 2, wherein the compound is selected from astragaloside IV, cycloastragenol, astragenol, astragaloside IV 16-one, cycloastragenol 6-β-D-glucopyranoside, and cycloastragenol 3-β-D-xylopyranoside.

9. The method of claim 8, wherein the compound is selected from astragaloside IV, cycloastragenol, astragenol, and astragaloside IV 16-one.

10. The method of claim 9, wherein said compound is astragaloside IV.

11. A method for conditioning the skin, comprising: applying topically to the skin a formulation comprising a compound of formula II:



II

where:

each of X^4 and X^5 is independently selected from hydroxy, lower alkoxy, lower acyloxy, keto, and a glycoside, and

OR^3 is selected from hydroxy, lower alkoxy, lower acyloxy, and a glycoside,

wherein any of the hydroxyl groups on said glycoside may be substituted with a further glycoside, lower alkyl, or lower acyl, such that the compound includes a maximum of three glycosides.

12. The method of claim 11, wherein said compound includes zero, one, or two glycosides, none of which is substituted with a further glycoside.

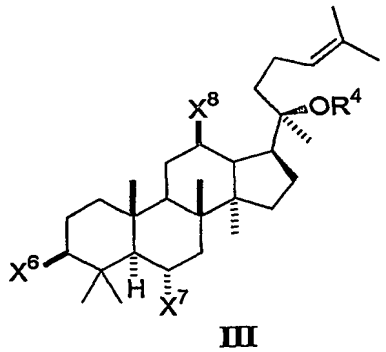
13. The method of claim 11, wherein each said glycoside, when present, is of the D configuration.

14. The method of claim 12, wherein each of X^4 and OR^3 is selected from hydroxy, lower alkoxy, lower acyloxy, and a glycoside, and X^5 is selected from hydroxy, lower alkoxy, lower acyloxy, and keto (=O).

15. The method of claim 12, wherein X^4 is OH or a glycoside, and each of X^5 and OR^3 is OH.

16. The method of claim 15, wherein X^4 is OH.

17. A method for conditioning the skin, comprising: applying topically to the skin a formulation comprising a compound of formula III:



III

where:

each of X^6, X^7, and X^8 is independently selected from hydroxy, lower alkoxy, lower acyloxy, keto, and a glycoside, and

OR^4 is selected from hydroxy, lower alkoxy, lower acyloxy, and a glycoside,

wherein any of the hydroxyl groups on said glycoside may be substituted with a further glycoside, lower alkyl, or lower acyl, such that the compound includes a maximum of three glycosides.

18. The method of claim 17, wherein said compound includes zero, one, or two glycosides, none of which is substituted with a further glycoside.

19. The method of claim 17, wherein each said glycoside, when present, is of the D configuration.

20. The method of claim 17, wherein each of X^6, X^7, X^8 and OR^4 is independently selected from hydroxy, lower alkoxy, lower acyloxy, and a glycoside.

21. The method of claim 20, wherein each of X^6, X^7, X^8 and OR^4 is independently selected from hydroxy and a glycoside.

22. The method of claim 21, wherein each of X^8 and OR^4 is OH, and each of X^6 and X^7 is independently selected from hydroxyl and a glycoside.

23. The method of claim 22, wherein each of OR^4, X^6 and X^8 is OH, and X^7 is a glycoside.

24. The method of claim 23, wherein the compound is ginsenoside RH1.

25. The method of any of claims 1, 11, and 17, wherein the concentration of said compound in said formulation is from 0.01 to 5% (w/v).

26. The method of claim 25, wherein said concentration is from 0.01 to 1% (w/v).

27. The method of any of claims 1, 11, and 17, wherein the concentration of said compound in said formulation is greater than 0.005% and less than 0.1% (w/v).

28. The method of any of claims 1, 11, and 17, wherein the formulation further comprises one or more additional ingredients selected from the group consisting of an emulsifier, a thickener, and a skin emollient.

29. The method of claim 28, wherein the formulation comprises one or more ingredients selected from an emulsifier and a skin emollient.

30. The method of claim 29, wherein the formulation comprises a skin emollient.

31. The method of any of claims 1, 11, and 17, wherein the biological activity of said compound is such that a composition containing the compound at a concentration of 1 μg/ml or less is effective to produce a telomerase activity at least 25% greater than observed in a vehicle control, as measured in a TRAP assay of keratinocyte or fibroblast cells.

32. The method of any of claims 1, 11, and 17, wherein the biological activity of said compound is such that a composition containing the compound at a concentration of 1 μg/ml or less is effective to produce an amount of cell reconfluence in a scratch assay of keratinocytes which is at least 25% greater than that seen in untreated or other control cells.